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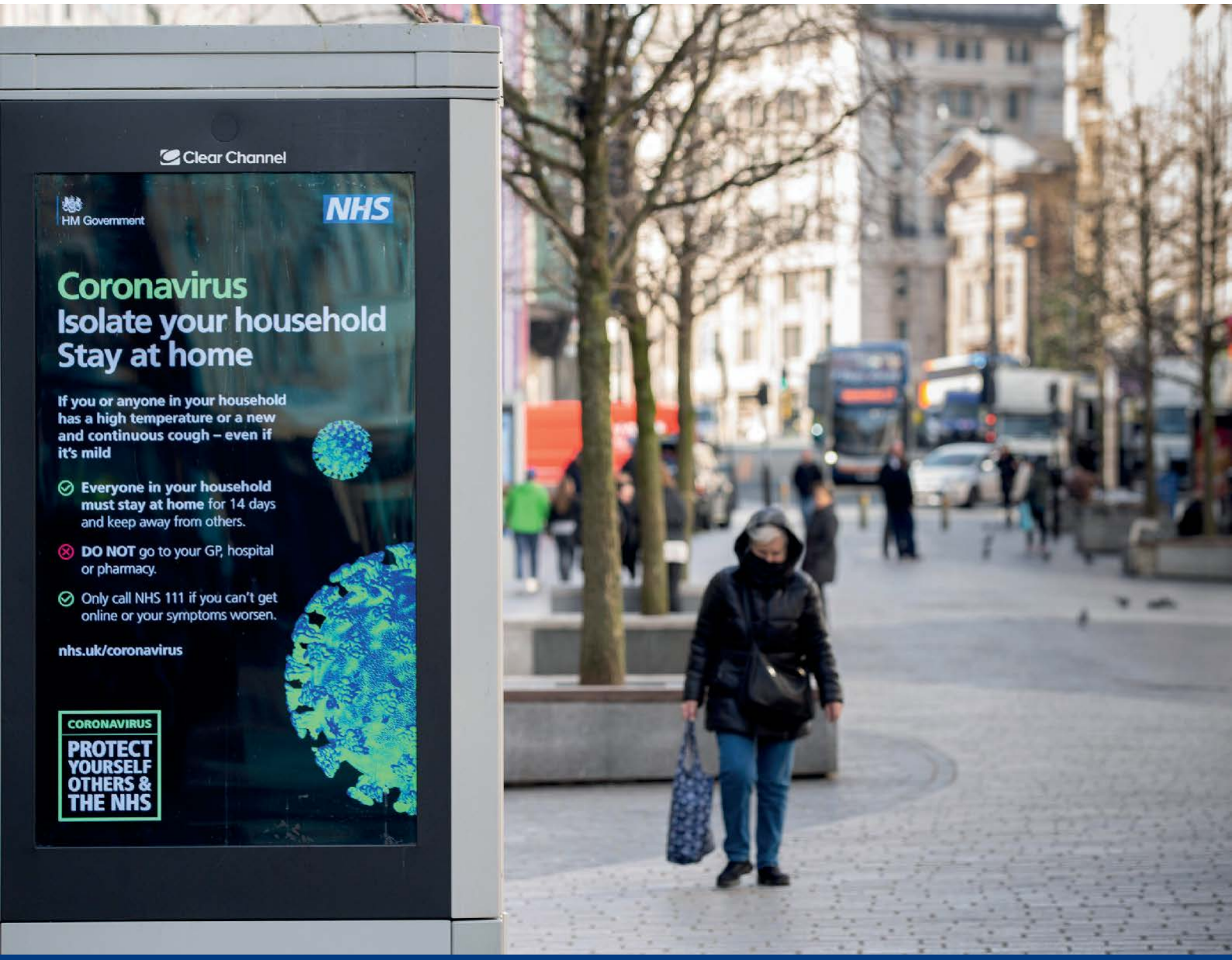

Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

Cycling and Walking: A Faster Route to a Safer and Stronger Liverpool City Region

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Policy Briefing 010 **May** 2020

Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities

Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

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Key takeaways

1. COVID-19 has emphasised that Liverpool City Region's (LCR) active travel infrastructure needs to be drastically expanded in order to create safe travel options and limit the impact of economic disruption, stress on the transport network, and negative health outcomes.
2. Creating the space for safe and socially distanced active travel requires immediate implementation and planning for the medium term. Institutions and sectors across the City Region can and should work together on this, but the individual local authorities have planning responsibility.
3. Active travel should be rolled out first in disadvantaged communities, which are more adversely affected by the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 and attendant social distancing measures.
4. Active travel can be implemented at low cost, rapidly and with maximal flexibility, and can be tailored across the City Region. Measures have already been announced by the combined and local authorities but they should be more ambitious in scope.
5. Such policy measures are cross-cutting, and will benefit the economic, environmental (including air quality), and health and wellbeing agendas in the medium and longer term. Even at a very low modal share, pre-lockdown cycling levels took 29,000 cars off the roads and added £100m to the City Region's economy each year.

1. Introduction

This policy briefing focuses on changing transport needs within the Liverpool City Region (LCR), and how we can reconfigure our roads and footpaths to make sure we can travel and exercise in a way that is safe and socially distanced.

We argue that "active travel" – in other words, walking and cycling – presents a transport solution that will keep the City Region moving, particularly as our public transport network must operate on a reduced capacity as the lockdown eases.

Active travel is an approach being embraced by towns and cities across the world, and is one which is both easy to implement and low in cost. Most importantly, we make the case that the failure to embrace active travel will disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged residents of our towns and cities – who, having borne the greatest social and health costs of this crisis in the short term, are most reliant on public transport networks to get to work.

We argue that whilst the "Great Pause" brought about by lockdown has exposed how the spaces for walking and cycling are not fit for purpose, it also presents a once in a generation opportunity to make great strides in putting this right. However, this is an opportunity that will not last, and thus swift and decisive action is needed.

2. What are the short-term active travel challenges and opportunities?

The abrupt change in the rhythms of urban traffic brought about by COVID-19 highlights an immediate need for alternative travel provision and, concomitantly, represents an opportunity to make a lasting change to modal splits (i.e. the percentage of travellers using particular types of transportation).

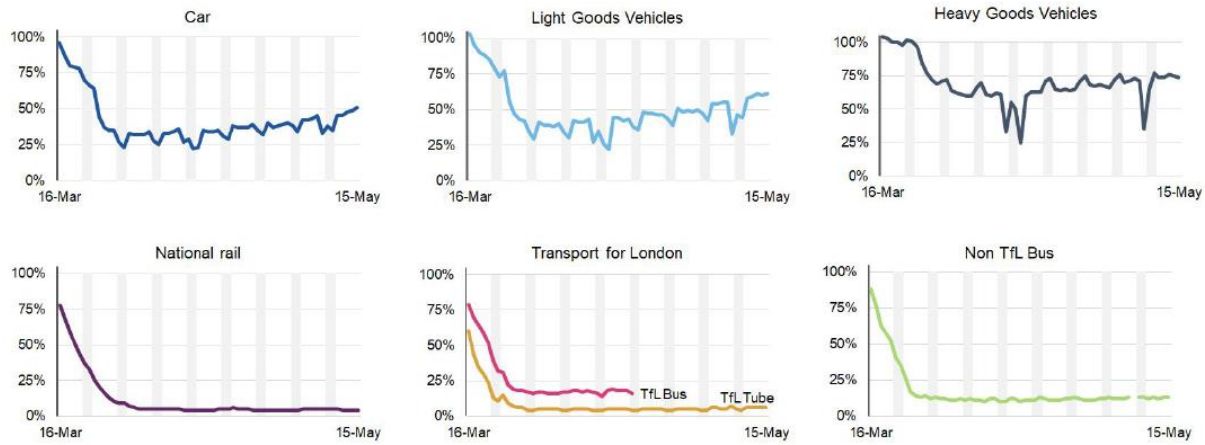
A common theme amongst cities placed into lockdown is that their road space lies temporarily empty. The induced demand brought about through car-focused policies such as adding in additional lanes, has evaporated. Simultaneously, people are returning to the streets in a different way, walking and cycling as a means to get their daily exercise and to meet their daily needs (e.g. shopping for essentials). With indications that social distancing measures may remain in place for months, or even years, this is the largest medium-term shift in transport need since the 1950s. Yet those same people – that have no legal choice but local exercise – are finding that whilst the roads are at their lowest vehicular capacity since 1955, the space left for pedestrians and cyclists is largely unfit for purpose, both in terms of walking / conducting exercise safely, and at the minimum two metres apart.

As the UK Government's plans for the phased return of economic activity become clearer, this opening up process will increasingly have implications for commuting via a transport network, which will not be able to operate on pre-COVID-19 modal splits. Although figures vary, it is clear that public transport in particular will be forced to operate at limited capacity. This leaves two realistic outcomes: a substantial spike in car travel for commuting; or a shift towards active travel (i.e. walking and cycling) that supports both commuting and daily exercise.

3. Why does this matter for the Liverpool City Region?

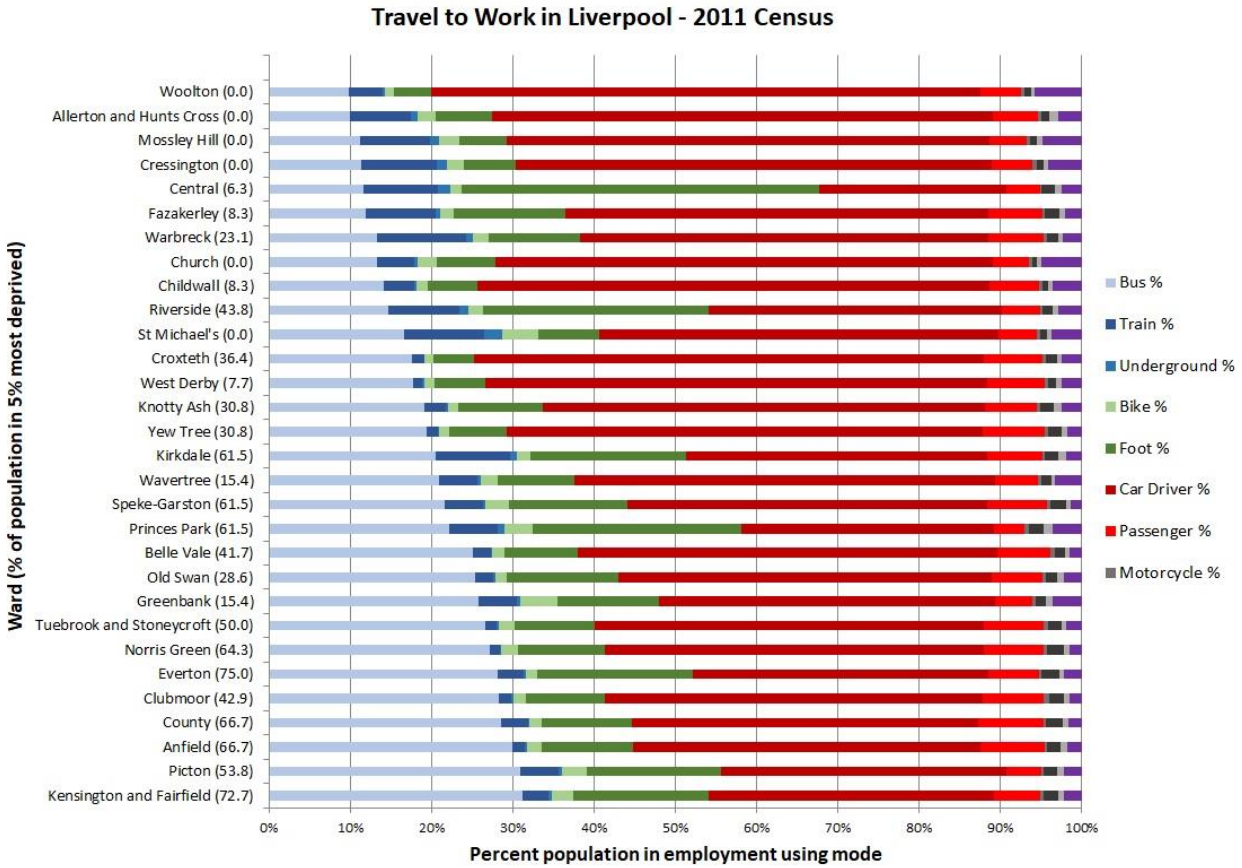
Outcome one (a substantial spike in car travel) is plausible, but deeply undesirable. In the week preceding the lockdown, the Department for Transport (DfT) reported on how public transport use slumped much more quickly compared with private car use (Figure 1). Yet if public transport remains undesirable or impractical and people were to return to their cars (on a longer-term basis, perhaps in even greater numbers), the result would be increased congestion, increased air and noise pollution, and detrimental impacts on parking for businesses opening later in the day due to a phased re-opening. Given that all local authorities within the LCR have declared a climate emergency, this is a wholly counter-productive step.

Figure 1. Changes in transport use in Great Britain (16 March-15 May, 2020)



(Credit: [Slides and datasets to accompany UK Government coronavirus press conference, 17 May 2020])

Figure 2. Public transport and deprivation in Liverpool City Council



(Source: 2011 Census and Liverpool City Council 2018)

This would also be deeply unfair. If we take Liverpool City Council as an illustrative example (Figure 2), we can see that transport choices correspond clearly with deprivation levels. In other words, the more deprived the area you live in, the more likely you are to use the bus. Car ownership is also lower in those places. Conversely, the less deprived the area you live in, the more likely you are to have access to a private car.

Therefore, any strategy which opts for reduced bus capacity and an emphasis on car travel will adversely affect the most disadvantaged areas of our towns and cities. People living in these areas are more likely to work in jobs which cannot be conducted from home (e.g. manual jobs, retail), and will not be able to retreat to cars to get to work in a socially distanced way. If the bus networks they rely on cannot get them to work in a timely and safe manner, they need a viable alternative, or face even more dire economic consequences. These are the people who have already been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 to begin with, both in terms of economic and health effects, and are the least able to continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden in the medium-to-longer term.

If public transport is going to operate on a reduced capacity, there is a solution which does speak to the problem in a way that cars do not: active travel. The benefits that walking and cycling bring to health, pollution reduction, air quality, congestion, and economic agendas are well documented. Now, they also bring further benefits, in that increased active travel will ease the burden on a public transport network that will be unable to deal with pre-COVID-19 capacity, and prevent an unsustainably high level of private-car

traffic. Furthermore, the same infrastructure that supports active travel also supports appropriate forms of exercise, whilst recognising, importantly, the need for social distancing. In other words, active travel supports those who are economically active and commuting, those who are seeking to meet their daily needs (e.g. shopping), and also the most vulnerable groups, who will benefit from safe, local, daily exercise.

4. Now what?

Cities across the globe are grappling with this problem and coming up with the same solution: an expanded (perhaps) temporary, active travel network. These cities include New York, Berlin, Milan, Brussels, Auckland and Paris, to name but a few. In the UK, examples include Leicester, Brighton and Manchester, with Leicester creating "key worker" corridors along busy routes to its hospital. Central government is even recognising this opportunity, announcing £250m of funding to create these pop-up spaces (DfT 2020).

There are two core characteristics we can see across all cities deploying this strategy:

- The closing of roads entirely to cars to create routes dedicated to active travel
- The reclaiming of lane space to enable, (a) the widening of footpaths for more effective social distancing; and / or (b) the creation of segregated cycleways.

In most cases these are not high-tech responses (see Figure 3), but instead rely on temporary barriers and cones to create new space. This is what is known as "tactical urbanism". This type of walking and cycling infrastructure can be rolled out quickly and at relatively low cost – for example, the city of Ghent in Belgium created a city-wide network over one weekend. This is an approach that has been recognised by the City Region's cycling and walking commissioner in his open letter calling for a "quiet revolution" in transport as we look towards our COVID-19 recovery (see Tyrrell 2020).

Figure 3. 'Pop-up' cycle lane interventions in Leicester.

(Credit: Joe Earley)

In the UK, this is within the gift of local authorities (i.e. Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St. Helens and Wirral) to instigate. However, in built-up city regions such as the Liverpool City Region, strategic thinking at the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) scale is also important. With workers travelling between boroughs across the City Region to get to work, it is important to make sure that any "pop-up" bike lanes connect to allow for seamless journeys. This could be an opportunity to bring forward elements of existing plans, such as the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) (LCRCA 2019).

In some cases, such as road closures or the suspension of parking bays outside

shops to facilitate socially distanced queuing, local authorities can deploy Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs), a process which has been streamlined by DfT to reduce the length and levels of consultation required under normal circumstances.

In other cases – and as we are seeing in Leicester – the creation of segregated cycleways does not restrict access, and thus does not require a TRO. This significantly speeds up the pace at which local authorities are able to act.

The LCRCA also has a role in facilitating cross-river travel. Early in the crisis, Merseytravel lifted the daily restrictions on bicycles in the Mersey Tunnel, for example. It is this kind of innovative thinking that allows cyclists travelling to work from the Wirral to cross safely.

This is important, as, with the UK Government preparing its post-lockdown strategy and plans for resuming economic activity, it is estimated that we have between four to five weeks to implement an active travel strategy before this perhaps once in a generation opportunity is lost.

5. Policy implications of introducing active travel measures

This is a popular policy. Even before COVID-19, data collected by the Sustrans Bike-Life survey, which captures the views of all people (i.e. not just cyclists), suggested that 69% of residents in the LCR supported building extra cycle lanes – even if that means taking space away from cars (Sustrans 2020).

Cycling is also undoubtedly good for the LCR. Pre-lockdown, Sustrans estimated that cycling took approximately 29,000 cars off the road each day, and created nearly £100m in economic benefit. In order to keep the City Region's transport network moving post-lockdown, there is a need to not just maintain cycle lanes, but grow them significantly. This will play a key role in how the LCR bounces back in the recovery period. In 2018, the average driver in Liverpool lost 119 hours of their life and £878 because of congestion (Inrix 2018). Simply put, the City Region cannot work if people struggle to get around because they either cannot take the bus or train, or are stuck in traffic.

The creation of temporary, safe, segregated cycle lanes and spaces for exercise also provides opportunities to address some of the City Region's other shortcomings. For example, it performs poorly on the rate of those killed or seriously injured (KSI) when involved in accidents whilst riding their bikes. On this measure, Liverpool City Council has the unenviable position of being the worst metropolitan authority in the entire country (Walk & Cycle Merseyside 2019).

Depending on how far we push, it is possible we might be able to deliver some of the City Region's active travel ambitions early. This should be treated as a positive, and the LCWIP process seen as an opportunity to make the temporary permanent, and perhaps even to be ambitious and push further.

It is important to recognise that this opportunity comes at a time when local authority funding is stretched – not only by a decade of austerity, but additionally through the funding shortfall from central government relating to the COVID-19 response. In the short term, we have seen local authorities repurpose transport funds towards pop-up lanes, and the Combined Authority has just announced £30m in support of this ambition (LCRCA 2020). However, the £250m announced by Grant Shapps, Secretary of State for Transport, as the first tranche of £2bn allocated for walking and cycling, should provide some of the means to achieve active travel priorities (DfT 2020). Whether this funding is enough remains to be seen, but our

understanding is that this money is going to be determined through a formula allocation, meaning that LCR is poised to see a significant portion of it.

6. The imperative to act

Transport planners for the City Region have long championed a transport network which slowly reduces our reliance on private cars. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a once in a generation opportunity to take significant strides in not only achieving these ambitions, but pushing well beyond them to create a long-lasting transport network that would have been inconceivable pre-lockdown.

There are four simple points that underscore the case for creating infrastructure for safe and socially distanced active travel and exercise:

- It is not an expensive policy
- It is an incredibly popular policy
- It is good for the City Region in the short, medium and longer term.

However, and most importantly:

- The window of opportunity is small. We need to act now.

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